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ABSTRACT

The Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP), implemented in 1989, requires student assessment in reading, writing, and math prior to regular college course work. Students undergo continuous remediation until they are able to pass the assessment test. Though TASP advocates argue that the program helps maintain academic standards and provides students with needed remediation, results are unfavorable and critics charge that the program does not produce greater retention or graduation rates, limits minority access to education, and is too costly. A Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board evaluation of TASP revealed the following: (1) Texas institutions emphasized compliance with the law rather than the outcomes and quality of remedial programs; (2) there was a significant lack of early remediation efforts in high school and articulation between postsecondary and secondary education; and (3) developmental education had become a repository for many "problem" students. In 1997, Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 148, which encouraged rewarding students for high school achievement by providing them a means of TASP exemption; taking the TASP in high school; capping the amount of state reimbursement for developmental course hours; providing an earlier and improved means of student assessment; and offering an alternative means of exiting remediation. (YKH)

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Changing State Policy in Texas for Remedial/Developmental Education

Remarks delivered at the
Forum on State Legislative Roles for Community Colleges,
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Washington, D.C.
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Outline

I. Creation and implementation of the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP): 1987-1989
II. Disappointing results, 1989-1995
III. Program Review and Evaluation, 1995-1996
IV. Program Reforms, 1997-1998

The Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) was created in 1987 and implemented in 1989. It required all students entering Texas public colleges and universities in Fall 1989 and thereafter to be assessed in reading, writing and math. Students had to take all three sections of the TASP test before they completed 9 semester credit hours (SCH) of college course work and pass all three sections before they could receive an associate degree or progress beyond 60 SCH of college course work. Any student failing one or more sections of the TASP test was required to enroll in continuous remediation until such time as he or she passed the failed sections of the test.

Over time, the results of TASP appeared mixed at best. Although its champions argued that TASP helped maintain academic standards and contributed to the quality of students' lives in their gaining needed remediation, critics charged that the program did not seem to produce appreciably greater retention or graduation rates for students overall, and perhaps even limited access to higher education for minority students, who appeared disproportionately impacted. Other critics denounced the program as it became increasingly bureaucratic in its policies and rules, intrusive on local autonomy, and cost the taxpayers more and more money. From less that $30 million appropriated by the state for developmental education for the biennium following the 1987 legislative session, costs quintupled in eight years to over $150 million for the biennium following the 1995 legislative session.

In between 1995 and 1997, state officials demanded to know what the state was getting from its investment and whether TASP was effective. In April 1996, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board hired Dr. Hunter Boylan, Director of the National Center for Developmental Education at Appalachian State University in North Carolina to head a team of outside consultants to evaluate the TASP. Dr. Boylan's team made 20 site visits, surveyed 96 other institutions, and analyzed all relevant state data and documents. He delivered a masterful

report in September 1996 with 105 recommendations on how the TASP might be improved. (A complete copy of Dr. Boylan's report is available on our Web site at www.thecb.state.tx.us).

Obviously, there's no way I can cover all of his recommendations during my time allotment today, but I'd like to mention the most important and then share how the report, along with other state efforts, contributed to significant modifications designed to improve the TASP and its results.

1. Perhaps the most significant finding of the Boylan report was that, except for isolated examples here and there, Texas institutions emphasized compliance with the law rather than the outcomes of remediation. Consequently, overall quality of remedial programs was poor.

   (a). In too many programs, there was an over-reliance on adjunct and poorly-trained faculty who did not participate in professional associations or utilize the latest research and best practices as reported in the professional literature.

   (b) Programs tended to be decentralized, lacked proper coordination, lacked clear statements of goals and expectations, and seldom engaged in ongoing and systematic self-evaluation. Many programs lacked documentation tracking student results over time which might offer a basis upon which program improvements could be planned and implemented.

   (c) While many programs supplemented TASP with local assessment tests for placement of students in courses, few programs utilized non-cognitive measures to assess students' personalities, learning styles, or instructional type preferences. Programs tended to apply a "one size fits all" mentality with instruction not sufficiently tailored to the needs of individual students.

   (d) Many campus environments bred negative attitudes toward and among developmental students. Often, comments of college administrators as well as students did not reflect a proper understanding or appreciation of the purposes and goals, and hence the value of developmental education.

2. The second major area of findings by Boylan included a significant lack of articulation between postsecondary and secondary education in the state and early intervention efforts to remediate students while they were still in high school. Boylan noted that institutions seemed not to place a high priority on either *effectiveness* or *efficiency* in the delivery of developmental education. There was a lack of institutional efforts to move students successfully through developmental education in the least amount of time.

3. Finally, something Boylan did not emphasize, but many other observers did, was the fact that developmental education had become a repository for many students, not just for those minimally lacking in college-level skills, but also for those seriously deficient in skills and who more properly belonged in ABE, GED, or ESL classes. Due to very low institutional funding of those activities by the state, and lack of federal financial aid opportunities for students, however, those students flocked into developmental education instead. The results, measured in terms of TASP pass rates, not surprisingly, were most disappointing.

In 1997, the Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 148 which addressed many of these concerns and we are currently in the process of adopting new policies:

1. To encourage and reward students for high levels of achievement while they are still in high school, we are setting scores for students on the SAT, ACT, and TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills - the state test required of students to graduate from high school) tests by which they may gain exemption from TASP.

2. We are encouraging students to take the TASP test while they are still in high school. Part of the "disconnect" between our high schools and colleges in the past has been the fact that the TAAS test measures 10th grade skills, while the TASP measures college-level skills. Due to similar acronyms, the TAAS and TASP tests were easily confused, and many high school students mistakenly assumed that they were one and the same.

3. In an effort to increase institutional responsibility for remediation results, the state is capping developmental course hours for which colleges may receive state reimbursement — 27 SCH for students in community colleges and 18 SCH for students in universities. Further, the state is offering a monetary "bonus" to institutions (currently proposed at $1000) for each student who successfully completes remediation.

4. To emphasize earlier and more convenient diagnosis of student skills, better course placement of students, and collection of baseline data against which "value added" progress may later be measured, the 9-hr rule will be eliminated and students must be assessed *prior* to taking any college-level courses.

   Colleges may use one of five assessment instruments approved by the Coordinating Board: TASP (or the new "QuickTASP" being developed by National Evaluation Systems); the Asset or the computerized version, COMPASS, offered by ACT; or the Multiple Assessment Programs and Services (MAPS), or its computerized version, ACCUPLACER, offered by the College Board. Common "cut-scores" for the placement of students in developmental education will be determined and correlated across the instruments by the Coordinating Board. (Note: due to other state laws, colleges may still exempt certain categories of students from this requirement. For example, students

enrolling in a vocational certificate program of one year or less are exempt. Dr. Boylan criticized this exemption, claiming that college-level skills are necessary not only for success in college, but success in life. Nonetheless, the legislative exemption remains.)

5. To guard against reliance on a single measure for results, students will now have an alternative means of exiting remediation. Once they have completed the remedial sequence, they may either retake and pass the TASP test, or they may "B out," that is, earn a grade of B or better in any of a set of prescribed freshman college-level courses.

In addition to these reforms, the Coordinating Board sponsored a statewide conference on developmental education in October 1997 and is currently collecting materials for a forthcoming publication on best practices. Greater efforts are being made to increase knowledge and preparation among high school students for college participation and community colleges have been encouraged to contract with high schools in the provision of developmental education. State reports are being examined and rewritten to collect better information on student performance prior, during, and subsequent to remediation. And finally, all colleges are being asked to engage in consistent and systematic self-evaluation.

We don't pretend to think that these current reforms will solve all our problems in developmental education, but we do feel that we made some major progress on this front over the past decade and are currently poised for even greater progress in the future.